ALICE OF OLD VINCENNES

By MAURICE THOMPSON

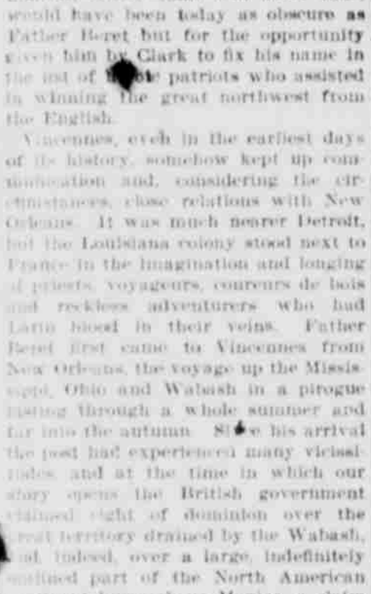
CHAPTER II.

A LETTER FROM AFAR.

ALTHOUGH Father Beret was for many years a missionary on the Wabash, most of the time at Vincennes, the fact that no mention of him can be found in the records is not stranger than many other things connected with the old town's history. He was, like nearly all the men of his calling in that day, a self effacing and modest hero, apparently quite unaware that he deserved attention. He and Father Gibault, whose name is so beautifully and nobly connected with the stirring achievements of Colonel George Rogers Clark, were close friends and often companions. Probably Father Gibault himself, whose fame will never fade, would have been today as obscure as Father Beret but for the opportunity given him by Clark to fix his name in the list of those patriots who assisted in winning the great northwest from the English.

Vincennes, even in the earliest days of its history, somehow kept up communication and, considering the circumstances, close relations with New Orleans. It was much nearer Detroit, but the Louisiana colony stood next to France in the imagination and longing of priests, voyageurs, coureurs de bois and reckless adventurers who had Latin blood in their veins. Father Beret first came to Vincennes from New Orleans, the voyage up the Mississippi, Ohio and Wabash in a pirogue lasting through a whole summer and far into the autumn. Since his arrival the post had experienced many vicissitudes, and at the time in which our story opens the British government claimed right of dominion over the great territory drained by the Wabash, and, indeed, over a large, indefinitely outlined part of the North American continent lying above Mexico, a claim just then being vigorously questioned, firebrand in hand, by the Anglo-American colonies.

Of course the handful of French people at Vincennes, so far away from every center of information and



"Here is a letter for you, father."

wholly occupied with their trading, trapping and missionary work, were late finding out that war existed between England and her colonies. Nor did it really matter much with them, one way or another. They felt secure in their lonely situation, and so went on selling their trinkets, weapons, domestic implements, blankets and intoxicating liquors to the Indians, whom they held bound to them with a power never possessed by any other white dwellers in the wilderness. Father Beret was probably subordinate to Father Gibault. At all events the latter appears to have had nominal charge of Vincennes, and it can scarcely be doubted that he left Father Beret on the Wabash while he went to live and labor for a time at Kaskaskia, beyond the plains of Illinois.

It is a curious fact that religion and the power of rum and brandy worked together successfully for a long time in giving the French posts almost absolute influence over the wild and savage men by whom they were always surrounded. The good priests deprecated the traffic in liquors and tried hard to control it, but soldiers of fortune and reckless traders were in the majority, their interests taking precedence of all spiritual demands and carrying everything along. What could the brave missionaries do but make the very best of a perilous situation?

But if the effect of rum as a beverage had strong allurement for the white man, it made an absolute slave of the Indian, who never hesitated for a moment to undertake any task, no matter how hard, bear any privation, even the most terrible, or brave any danger, although it might demand reckless desperation, if in the end a well filled bottle or jug appeared as his reward.

Of course the traders did not overlook such a source of power. Alcoholic liquor became their implement of almost magical work in controlling the lives, labors and resources of the Indians. The priests, with their captivating story of the cross, had a large influence in softening savage natures and averting many an awful danger, but, when everything else failed, rum always came to the rescue of a threatened French post.

We need not wonder, then, when we are told that Father Beret made no sign of distress or disapproval upon being informed of the arrival of a boat loaded with rum, brandy or gin. It was Rene de Ronville who brought the news, the same Rene already mentioned as having given the priest a plate of squirrels. He was sitting on the doorsill of Father Beret's hut when the old man reached it after his visit at the Roussillon home and held in his hand a letter which he appeared proud to deliver.

"A batteau and seven men with a cargo of liquor came during the rain," he said, rising and taking off his curious cap, which, made of an animal's skin, had a tail jauntily dangling from its crown tip, "and here is a letter for you, father. The batteau is from New Orleans. Eight men started with it, but one went ashore to hunt and was killed by an Indian."

Father Beret took the letter without apparent interest and said:

"Thank you, my son, sit down again; the door log is not wetter than the stools inside; I will sit by you."

The wind had driven a flood of rain into the cabin through the open door, and water twinkled in puddles here and there on the floor's puncheons. They sat down side by side, Father Beret fingering the letter in an absent minded way.

"There'll be a jolly time of it tonight," Rene de Ronville remarked; "a roaring time."

"Why do you say that, my son?" the priest demanded.

"The wine and the liquor," was the reply. "Much drinking will be done. The men have all been dry here for some time, you know, and are as thirsty as sand. They are making ready to enjoy themselves down at the river house."

"Ah, the poor souls!" sighed Father Beret, speaking as one whose thoughts were wandering far away.

"Why don't you read your letter, Father?" Rene added.

The priest started, turned the soiled square of paper over in his hand, then thrust it inside his robe.

"It can wait," he said. Then, changing his voice: "The squirrels you gave me were excellent, my son. It was good of you to think of me," he added, laying his hand on Rene's arm.

"Oh, I'm glad if I have pleased you, Father Beret, for you are so kind to me always, and to everybody. When I killed the squirrels I said to myself, 'These are young, juicy and tender; Father Beret must have these,' so I brought them along."

The young man rose to go, for he was somehow impressed that Father Beret must wish opportunity to read his letter and would prefer to be left alone with it. But the priest pulled him down again.

"Stay awhile," he said. "I have not had a talk with you for some time."

Rene looked a trifle uneasy.

"You will not drink any tonight, my son," Father Beret added. "You must not. Do you hear?"

The young man's eyes and mouth at once began to have a sullen expression. Evidently he was not pleased and felt rebellious, but it was hard for him to resist Father Beret, whom he loved, as did every soul in the post. The priest's voice was sweet and gentle, yet positive to a degree. Rene did not say a word.

"Promise me that you will not taste liquor this night," Father Beret went on, grasping the young man's arm firmly. "Promise me, my son; promise me."

Still Rene was silent. The men did not look at each other, but gazed away across the country beyond the Wabash to where a glory from the western sun flamed on the upper rim of a great cloud fragment creeping along the horizon.

"Eh bien, I must go," said Rene presently, getting to his feet nimbly and evading Father Beret's hand, which would have held him.

"Not to the river house, my son?" said the priest appealingly.

"No, not there. I have another letter; one for M'sieu' Roussillon. It came by the boat too. I go to give it to Mme. Roussillon."

Rene de Ronville was a dark, weather stained young fellow, neither tall nor short, wearing buckskin moccasins, trousers and tunic. His eyes were dark brown, keen, quick moving, set well under heavy brows. A razor had probably never touched his face, and his thin, curly beard crinkled over his strongly turned cheeks and chin, while his mustaches sprang out quite fiercely above his full lipped, almost sensual mouth. He looked wiry and active, a man not to be lightly reckoned with in a trial of bodily strength and will power.

Father Beret's face and voice changed on the instant. He laughed dryly and said, with a sly gleam in his eyes:

"You could spend the evening pleasantly with Mme. Roussillon and Jean. Jean, you know, is a very amusing fellow."

Rene brought forth the letter of which he had spoken and held it up before Father Beret's face.

"Maybe you think I haven't any letter for M'sieu' Roussillon," he blurted, "and maybe you are quite certain that I am not going to the house to take the letter."

"M. Roussillon is absent, you know," Father Beret suggested. "But cherry pies are just as good while he's gone as when he's at home, and I happen to know that there are some particularly delicious ones in the pantry of Mme. Roussillon. Milk. Alice gave me a juicy sample, but then I dare say you do not care to have your pie served by her hand. It would interfere with your appetite. Eh, my son?"

Rene turned short about, wagging his head and laughing, and so with his back to the priest, he strode away along the wet path leading to the Roussillon place.

Father Beret gazed after him, his face relaxing to a serious expression in which a trace of sadness and gloom spread like an elusive twilight. He took out his letter, but did not glance at it, simply holding it tightly gripped in his sinewy right hand. Then his old eyes stared vacantly, as eyes do when their sight is cast back many, many years into the past. The missive was from beyond the sea—he knew the handwriting—a waft of the flowers of Avignon seemed to rise out of it, as if by the pressure of his grasp.

A stoop shouldered, burly man went by, leading a pair of goats, a kid following. He was making haste excitedly, keeping the goats at a lively trot.

"Bon jour, Pere Beret," he flung out breezily, and walked rapidly on.

"Ah, ah; his mind is busy with the newly arrived cargo," thought the old priest, returning the salutation. "His throat aches for liquor—the poor man."

Then he read again the letter's superscription and made a faltering move as if to break the seal. His hands trembled violently, his face looked gray and drawn.

"Come on, you brutes," cried the receding man, jerking the thongs of skin by which he led the goats.

Father Beret rose and turned into his damp little hut, where the light was dim on the crucifix hanging opposite the door against the clay daubed wall. It was a bare, unsightly, clammy room. A rude bed on one side, a shelf for table and two or three wooden stools constituting the furniture, while the uneven puncheons of the floor wabbled and clattered under the priest's feet.

It had been many years since a letter from home had come to Father Beret. The last before the one now in hand had made him ill of nostalgia, fairly shaking his iron determination never to quit for a moment his life work as a missionary. Ever since that day he had found it harder to meet the many and stern demands of a most difficult and exacting duty. Now the mere touch of the paper in his hand gave him a sense of returning weakness, dissatisfaction and longing. The home of his boyhood, the rushing of the Rhone, a seat in a shady nook of the garden, Madeline, his sister, prattling beside him and his mother singing somewhere about the house—it all came back and went over him and through him, making his heart sink strangely, while another voice, the sweetest ever heard—but she was ineffable and her memory a forbidden fragrance.

Father Beret tottered across the forlorn little room and knelt before the crucifix, holding his clasped hands high, the letter pressed between them. His lips moved in prayer, but made no sound; his whole frame shook violently.

It would be unpardonable desecration to enter the chamber of Father Beret's soul and look upon his sacred and secret trouble, nor must we even speculate as to its particulars. The good old man writhed and wrestled before the cross for a long time, until at last he seemed to receive the calmness and strength he prayed for so fervently. Then he rose, tore the letter into pieces so small that not a word remained whole and squeezed them so firmly together that they were compressed into a tiny, solid ball which he let fall through a crack between the floor puncheons. After waiting twenty years for that letter, hungry as his heart was, he did not even open it when at last it arrived. He would never know what message it bore. The link between him and the old sweet days was broken forever. Now, with God's help, he could do his work to the end.

He went and stood in the doorway, leaning against the side. He looked toward the "river house," as the inhabitants had named a large shanty which stood on the bluff of the Wabash not far from where the road bridge at present crosses, and saw men gathering there.

Meantime Rene de Ronville had delivered Mme. Roussillon's letter with due promptness. Of course such a service demanded pie and claret. What still better pleased him, Alice chose to be more amiable than was usually her custom when he called. They sat together in the main room of the house, where M. Roussillon kept his books, his curiosities of Indian manufacture collected here and there, and his surplus firearms, swords, pistols and knives, ranged not unpleasingly around the walls.

Of course, along with the letter, Rene bore the news, so interesting to himself, of the boat's tempting cargo just discharged at the river house. Alice understood her friend's danger—felt it in the intense enthusiasm of his voice and manner. She had once seen the men carousing on a similar occasion when she was but a child, and the impression then made still remained in her memory. Instinctively she resolved to hold Rene by one means or another away from the river house if possible. So she managed to keep him occupied eating pie, sipping watered claret and chatting until night came on and Mme. Roussillon brought in a lamp. Then he hurriedly snatched his cap from the floor beside him and got up to go.

"Come and look at my handiwork," Alice quickly said; "my shelf of pies, I mean." She led him to the pantry, where a dozen or more of the cherry pates were ranged in order. "I made every one of them this morning and baked them; had them all out of the oven before the rain came up. Don't you think me a wonder of cleverness and industry? Father Beret was polite enough to flatter me; but you—you just eat what you want and say nothing! You are not polite, M. Rene de Ronville."

"I've been showing you what I thought of your goodies," said Rene. "Eating's better than talking, you know, so I'll just take one more," and he helped himself. "Isn't that compliment enough?"

"A few such would make me another hot day's work," she replied, laughing. "Pretty talk would be cheaper and more satisfactory in the long run. Even the flour in these pates I ground with my own hand in an Indian mortar. That was hard work too."

By this time Rene had forgotten the river house and the liquor. With softening eyes he gazed at Alice's rounded cheeks and sheeny hair, over which the light from the curious earthen lamp she bore in her hand flickered most effectively. He loved her madly, but his fear of her was more powerful than his love. She gave him no opportunity to speak what he felt, having ever ready a quick, bright change of mood and manner when she saw him plucking up courage to address her in a sentimental way. Their relations had long been somewhat familiar, which was but natural, considering their youth and the circumstances of their daily life, but Alice somehow had kept a certain distance open between them, so that very warm friendship could not suddenly resolve itself into a troublesome passion on Rene's part.

We need not attempt to analyze a young girl's feelings and motives in such a case. What she does and what she thinks are mysteries even to her own understanding. The influence most potent in shaping the rudimentary character of Alice Tarleton (called Roussillon) had been only such as a lonely frontier post could generate. Her associations with men and women had, with few exceptions, been unprofitable in an educational way, while her reading in M. Roussillon's little library could not have given her any practical knowledge of manners and life.

Her affection for Rene was interfered with by her large admiration for the heroic, masterful and magnetic knights who charged through the romances of the Roussillon collection. For although Rene was unquestionably brave and more than passably handsome, he had no armor, no war horse, no shining lance and embossed shield—the difference, indeed, was great.

Perhaps it was the light and heat of imagination shining out through Alice's face which gave her beauty such a fascinating power. Rene saw it and felt its electrical stroke send a sweet shiver through his heart while he stood before her.

"You are very beautiful tonight, Alice," he presently said, with a suddenness which took even her alertness by surprise. A flush rose to his dark face and immediately gave way to a grayish pallor. His heart came near stopping on the instant, he was so shocked by his own daring, but he laid a hand on her hair, stroking it softly.

Just a moment she was at a loss, looking a trifle embarrassed; then, with a merry laugh, she stepped aside and said:

"That sounds better, M. Rene de Ronville; much better. You will be as polite as Father Beret after a little more training."

She slipped past him while speaking and made her way back again to the main room, whence she called to him:

"Come here. I've something to show you."

He obeyed, a sheepish trace on his countenance betraying his self consciousness.

When he came near Alice, she was taking from its buckhorn hook on the wall a rapier, one of a beautiful pair hanging side by side.

"Papa Roussillon gave me these," she said, with great animation. "He bought them of an Indian who had kept them a long time. Where he came across them he would not tell. But look, how beautiful! Did you ever see anything so fine?"

Guard and hilt were of silver; the blade, although somewhat corroded, still showed the fine, wavy lines of Damascus steel and traces of delicate engraving, while in the end of the hilt was set a large oval turquoise.

"A very queer present to give a girl," said Rene. "What can you do with them?"

A captivating flash of playfulness came into her face and she sprang backward, giving the sword a semicircular turn with her wrist. The blade sent forth a keen hiss as it cut the air close, very close to Rene's nose. He jerked his head and flung up his hand.

She laughed merrily, standing beautifully poised before him, the rapier's point slightly elevated. Her short skirt left her feet and ankles free to show their graceful proportions and the perfect pose in which they held her supple body.

"You see what I can do with the colechemarde, eh, M. Rene de Ronville?" she exclaimed, giving him a smile which fairly blinded him. "Notice how very near to your neck I can thrust and yet not touch it. Now!"

She darted the keen point under his chin and drew it away so quickly that the stroke was like a glint of sunlight.

"What do you think of that as a nice and accurate piece of skill?"

She again resumed her pose, the right foot advanced, the left arm well back, her lissome, finely developed body leaning slightly forward.

Rene's hands were up before his face in a defensive position, palms outward.

Just then a chorus of men's voices sounded in the distance. The river

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house was beginning its carousal with a song. Alice let fall her sword's point and listened.

Rene looked about for his cap.

"I must be going," he said.

Another and louder swish of the rapier made him pirouette and dodge again with great energy.

"Don't," he cried, "that's dangerous. You'll put out my eyes. Please—"

such a girl!"

She laughed at him and kept on whipping the air dangerously near his eyes until she had driven him backward as far as he could squeeze himself into a corner of the room.

Mme. Roussillon came to the door from the kitchen and stood looking in and laughing, with her hands on her hips. By this time the rapier was making a crisscross pattern of flashing lines close to the young man's head while Alice, in the enjoyment of her exercise, seemed to concentrate all the glowing rays of her beauty in her face, her eyes dancing merrily.

"Quit now, Alice," he begged, half in fun and half in abject fear. "Please quit—I surrender!"

She thrust to the wall on either side of him, then springing lightly backward a pace, stood at guard. Her thick yellow hair had fallen over her neck and shoulders in a loose wavy mass, out of which her face beamed with a bewitching effect upon her captive.

Rene, glad enough to have a cessation of his peril, stood laughing dryly, but the singing down at the river house was swelling louder and he made another movement to go.

"Your surrendered, you remember," cried Alice, renewing the sword play. "Sit down on the chair there and make yourself comfortable. You are not going down yonder tonight; you are going to stay here and talk with me and Mother Roussillon. We are lonesome and you are good company."

A shot rang out keen and clear, there was a sudden tumult that broke up the singing, and presently more firing at varying intervals cut the night air from the direction of the river.

Jean, the hunchback, came in to say that there was a row of some sort. He had seen men running across the common as if in pursuit of a fugitive, but the moonlight was so dim that he could not be sure what it all meant.

Rene picked up his cap and bolted out of the house.

[TO BE CONTINUED]